DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 074 HE 014 100

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TITLE Implications of Differential Faculty Grading Standards and Practices by Academic Field. AIR Forum 1981 Paper.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (21st, Minneapolis, MN, May 17-20, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *College Faculty; *Evaluation Criteria; Grades (Scholastic); *Grading; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Intellectual Disciplines; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics; Testing; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum

ABSTRACT

The opinions of 514 college faculty concerning their grading philosophies, grading patterns, and their knowledge of how grades vary among fields were surveyed and classified according to demographic characteristics of the faculty. Approximately half of the respondents expressed the opinion that there is great variation in the meaning of a letter grade across academic fields. Faculty in fields that emphasize factual and cumulative course content tended to maintain that they grade lower than other fields, emphasized written tests and quizzes as factors in assigning grades, and expressed confidence in the letter-based system. In contrast, faculty in fine arts, education, and health expressed less confidence in the conventional grading system, held that a 'B' grade reflects average undergraduate performance, and used nonquantifiable factors, such as attitude and effort, in assigning student grades. In general, the faculty seemed more certain of how their own grades compare with other grades in their own field than about grades across fields. A majority of the faculty expressed the opinion that a department should set standards of performance. When asked to rank factors in the order of importance in determining a student's final grade, 59 percent of those teaching undergraduate courses and 35 percent of those teaching graduate courses listed tests and quizzes as the most important factor. It is suggested that faculty grading standards and practices are very strongly influenced by academic field. A faculty questionnaire is appended. (SW)

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Implications of Differential Faculty Grading Standards and Practices by Academic Field

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Paper Presented to 1981 Forum
Association for Institutional Research
Twin Cities
May, 1981

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Leamington Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 17-20, 1981. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

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Abstract

This survey discusses grading perceptions at a state university, obtained from a faculty-wide survey on individual grading practices, grading philosophies, and perceptions of how grades differ among fields. The analysis cross-classified opinions with demographic characteristics of the faculty. Approximately half of the 514 respondents expressed the opinion that there is great variation in the meaning of a letter grade across academic fields. Philosophies and practices were strongly associated with academic field. The survey results support several theories of grading in higher education. Implications are that different grading value systems are at work within a given institution and that grades are a function of the diversity found in students, faculties, programs, and campus political power.

Implications of Differential Faculty Grading Standards and Practices by Academic Field

An increase in average student grades during the late 1960s and early 1970s, concurrent with a decline in student scholastic ability examination scores, is used throughout higher education as ad hoc evidence that academic standards have deteriorated. While some of this information may seem substantial, there is still little empirical evidence to support this contention about academic standards (Prather, Smith & Kodras, 1979).

Observers generally overlook the fact that during this same period, higher education underwent many dramatic changes which included a diversification of degree program requirements, more heterogeneous student populations, and changes in faculty characteristics. It is important to note that the impact of these changes upon grading trends seldom has been the subject of empirical investigation. In studying grades, it is necessary not only to disaggregate the data and study the effect of the curriculum and students, but also to take into account faculty attitudes and characteristics as well.

Further, if different grading value systems are at work within a given faculty, then a mix of such systems may affect grade trends, honor awards, graduate admissions, program enrollments, evaluations, campus politics and power conflicts. The faculty opinion survey described here specifically addressed faculty perceptions of grading.[1] The study considered these questions: What are faculty opinions about their grading practices, their philosophies of grading, and their perceptions of how other faculty members grade? Is there an association between academic field and faculty opinions and between seniority of faculty members and their opinions?

Review of Related Literature

Faculty members interact with students differently,and vary according to the subjects they teach (Gamson, 1967; Thistlewaite & Wheeler, 1966). Blackburn (1971) stressed the danger of viewing the faculty as though all its individual members are the same. Peters (1974) wrote that "to insist on their sameness leads to untoward generalizations." It comes as no surprise that faculty differ in grading standards also. Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain those differences.

Adaptation-Level Theory

Helson (1947) developed a theory based on the influence of background stimuli on judgments. Helson's theory has been applied in a number of grade studies (Aiken, 1963; Goldman & Hewitt, 1975; Goldman & Slaughter, 1976; Goldman, Schmidt, Hewitt & Fisher, 1974; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; Hills, 1964; Hills & Gladney, 1968; Prather & Smith, 1976; Schoenfeldt & Bush, 1975). These studies support the adaptation-level theory: faculty adopt grading standards, consciously or unconsciously, that adjust for the ability level of the student population attracted to their institution, field or discipline. The Goldman studies concluded that the adaptation-level theory accounts for "stringent" grading standards for those fields with high ability students and for nonselection of such fields by many students. Consequently divergent trends in enrollments by field cause a shift in curricular emphasis within an institution over time and contribute to grade trends. Prather and Smith (1976) studied grades by faculty characteristics and found a strong empirical relationship between academic discipline and faculty grading patterns even after controlling for faculty professional and personal background characteristics.

Dressel's Theory

Dressel (1961) categorized three basic stereotypes of faculty members based on grading practices and philosophies. "Traditionalists" emphasize the formal, objective measurement of knowledge. They are most likely to criticize lax grading practices which they regard as currently affecting the quality of higher education. "Eclectics" view the college experience as a pluralistic one which requires that grading standards recognize differing student backgrounds and interests. They still claim to adhere to sound grading standards, however. "Relativists," a third group, view education as a continuing process of improvement and consider grading a harmful exercise which interferes with actual learning. Etzioni (1975) feels that a decline in standards might have resulted from the attempted mixture of these traditional and progressive concepts into one system.

Faculty Opinion Surveys

There are several representative investigations of differential grading standards in which faculty opinions about grading were sampled (Ladd & Lipset, 1977; McDonald, 1966; Oh, 1976). A national survey of faculty opinions analyzed by Ladd and Lipset found that more than 90 percent of the respondents felt that grade inflation was "a serious concern." A majority agreed that academic standards had recently declined. Those representing institutions with less stringent entrance requirements expressed the greatest concern over the decline. McDonald (1967) found that faculty members stated that their grading standards were absolute; however, their grades did not show an upward adjustment as the ability of their students increased. Oh (1976) found that academic field is strongly associated with faculty opinions about grading practices. Those in the natural sciences were most confident of their grading practices, while the faculty in humanities were less confident. The faculty in natural sciences generally disagreed with the

notion of adjusting the course level and content each quarter to the level of students, while the faculty in social sciences and humanities tended to favor adjustment.

Research Design

Questions for the present study were developed to measure faculty opinions of their grading philosophies, grading patterns, and their knowledge of how grades vary among fields.[2] Opinions on grading often involve complex interactions and are difficult to reduce into questions which allow for short, restricted answers. Closed-end choices were necessary, however, to standardize responses. Some questions were adapted from the surveys conducted by McDonald (1967) and Oh (1976). The survey instrument utilized in this study is provided in Figure 1.

Questionnaires were distributed through campus mail during the spring quarter, 1977. Of 1021 faculty teaching that quarter, 514 returned questionnaires. A goodness-of-fit analysis (Chi square) was performed to determine how representative the sample was of the total faculty population. Analyzed by rank, full professors, associate professors, and instructors appeared to be oversampled, slightly, while assistant professors and part-time faculty were undersampled. Graduate teaching assistant response was in proportion to the total GTA population.

The ensuing analysis of survey results consisted of a cross-classification of faculty opinions with faculty characteristics. A condensation of faculty opinions from the analysis is presented in narrative form.

Survey Results

Differential Opinions of Grading by Academic Field

Perceptions of Grading Variations Across Fields. Research on grading practices at the university studied and at other institutions supports the

hypothesis that there are definite differences in the grades assigned in different fields (Goldman et al., 1974; Schoenfeldt & Bush, 1975). Additionally, the results of this survey showed that faculty members are aware of these variations. When asked to what extent the meaning of a letter grade varies among fields at this university, approximately half of the faculty stated that the meaning varies "greatly." Faculty in the physical sciences, social sciences, and education tend to see the most variation among fields. Of these, faculty in physical sciences thought their field gives the "lowest" grades in comparison with other fields. Most faculty in business and social sciences also thought their field grades relatively "low." The faculty in education and health tend to feel their grades are "high" in comparison with other fields.

By contrast, only one fourth of the faculty believe that there is "great" variation in grading within their own field. Faculty in the physical sciences especially tend to feel there is little variation in grading within that field. Many faculty teaching graduate courses in education, though, hold the opinion that there is a great deal of grading variation within their field.

In general, the faculty seemed more certain of how their own grades compare with other grades in their own field than they were about grades across fields. A higher percentage of graduate faculty than undergraduate faculty believe that their grades are approximately the same as overall grades in their field. This is to be expected since the range for graduate grades is smaller than that for undergraduate grades.

A majority of the faculty expressed the opinion that a department should set standards of performance. Faculty members teaching undergraduate courses in fine arts and health comprise the highest percentage who think a

department should set standards. Students in fine arts are expected to meet artistic performance standards while those in the health field are expected to comply with clearly defined medical performance standards.

There is considerable variation among fields also on the question of whether a 'B' grade means average performance. Faculty who teach undergraduate courses in physical sciences, letters, and social sciences tend to disagree with the idea that a 'B' is average. The highest percentage of undergraduate faculty who feel that 'B' represents average is in education. Faculty in graduate courses consider 'B' a measure of average performance more than do faculty in undergraduate courses.

Individual Grading Practices Across Fields. When asked to rank factors in the order of importance in determining a student's final grade, 58 percent of those teaching undergraduate courses and 35 percent of those teaching graduate courses list tests and quizzes as the most important factor. Faculty who teach undergraduates rank these factors in the following order of importance: tests and quizzes, final examination, written assignments, class participation, attitude and effort, and attendance. The graduate faculty rank the factors similarly except that they consider written assignments more important than final examinations.

Differences by field in the way faculty rank the above factors were also noted. Faculty in the physical sciences represented the greatest percentage of those considering tests and quizzes most important. Faculty in education and letters tend to rank written assignments as most important and the faculty in fine arts feel that class participation and attitude are the primary factors in assigning a student's final grade. Faculty in business tend to rely on final examinations in assigning grades.

In response to a question concerning type of class presentation emphasized, graduate faculty tend to use discussion "primarily," while undergraduate faculty tend to lecture more frequently. Faculty who teach physical sciences represented the highest percentage in the use of lecture, while those in fine arts, letters, and education are less likely to employ this instructional method.

When asked the type of scale used in assigning a student's final grade, the majority of the faculty reported the use of an "absolute scale." "Absolute scale" was defined as follows: "Each student's performance is judged as a definite percent of perfection of achievement and is independent of the performance of other students. It is possible for each student to receive an excellent rating." Other possible choices of grading scales were the "relative" scale and the "peer" scale. Faculty teaching undergraduate business courses are lowest in the use of the "absolute" scale and highest in the use of "relative" scales.

The faculty were also asked to estimate the percentage of their grading based upon "objective" or "subjective" criteria. The majority of faculty responded that more than 75 percent of their grading is based on "objective" criteria. Of all the fields, fine arts faculty use objective criteria the least, while the faculty in the physical sciences use it the most.

The majority of faculty members responded negatively when asked if they adjust the content and level of academic material to the nature and level of the students enrolled each quarter. This finding is to be expected since the majority say they use an absolute scale based on objective criteria when grading. The faculty in education indicated the highest percentage of those who do adjust the level of academic material each quarter, while the faculty in fine arts often have no opinion on the subject.

Differential Grading Philosophies Across Fields. Eighty-eight percent of the faculty respondents feel that the grade they assign accurately reflects the level of knowledge a student has attained. By contrast, only 50 percent feel that grades "in general" reflect a student's ability. Faculty teaching courses in education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels showed the highest percentage who believe grades do not reflect ability.

When asked what type of grading system should be used at the university, three-fourths of the faculty opt for the "conventional grading system" rather than the "pass-fail system," "no grade system," or "other." Fourteen percent of the faculty who teach graduate courses want a "pass-fail system" as compared to four percent of faculty teaching undergraduate courses. A relatively high percentage of the faculty in fine arts propose "other" types of grading systems.

The faculty were asked whether they conceive of knowledge as a process and also whether they conceive of knowledge as a product. Eighty percent of the group consider knowledge an ongoing process and 50 percent consider knowledge as an end product.[3] Faculty in education represented the largest proportion of those considering knowledge as both a process and a product.

Eighty-nine percent of the faculty stated that one primary purpose of grading is to "describe" performance levels for students. About half of the faculty feel another primary purpose is to "motivate" students.[3] Faculty teaching graduate courses in physical sciences and business are relatively high in seeing motivation as a primary purpose of grades.

Differential Opinions of Grading by Seniority

There are several observations concerning the opinions of the faculty when grouped by the seniority variables. First, the older, the higher

ranked, the tenured, those with the highest degrees, and those with the most years of teaching in higher education tend to share similar opinions. The younger, lower ranked, non-tenured faculty with lower degrees and few years of teaching in higher education also tend to share similar opinions. Female faculty members are generally younger than males and are therefore often in the lower seniority group. The lower seniority group tends to be less sure of grading practices, philosophies, and variations in grading among fields, as evidenced by the large percentages of "don't know" answers. Also, faculty with first professional degrees often reported different opinions and grading practices from faculty with master's and doctorate degrees. These seniority variances are not as strong, however, as those associated with academic field.

Summary and Implications

This faculty survey sought opinions from a university teaching faculty on individual grading practices, grading philosophies, and perceptions of how grades differ among fields. The analysis cross-classified opinions with demographic characteristics of the faculty.

Approximately half of the survey respondents feel that there is "great" variation in the meaning of a letter grade across fields. Faculty in fields that emphasize factual and cumulative course content tend to maintain that they grade lower than other fields, emphasize written tests and quizzes as factors in assigning grades, and express conficence in the letter-based system. In contrast, faculty in fine arts, education, and health express less confidence in the conventional grading system, hold that a 'B' grade reflects average undergraduate performance, and use nonquantifiable factors, such as attitude and effort, in assigning student grades. These findings are similar to Oh's survey results (1976) and support several theories about differential faculty grading.

The implications are that faculty grading standards and practices are very strongly influenced by academic field. Different academic fields within the higher education curriculum appear to evaluate students differently. Faculty grading patterns across fields naturally mirror such differences. This research, along with that conducted by others, recognizes and gives a rationale to the differential grading phenomenon. Consensus of the meaning of a grade seems unlikely. By accepting these findings, academic administrators avoid the danger of untoward generalizations about grades and grading trends.

Different grading value systems are believed to be at work within any given faculty, and a mix of these systems affects grade trends, honor awards, graduate admissions, and program enrollments and evaluations (see Table 1). Moreover, advocates of a universal grading system seem to ignore or reject the diversity found within faculties, students, and programs. Grades are a function of this diversity rather than a scientific measurement system. To insist upon a uniform criterion for grades might contribute to more uniformity within higher education, but at the same time dilute its greatest strength--diversity.

The contemporary debate within the academic community centering around the necessity to change the "reformed" curriculum of the late 1960s and early 1970s deserves attention from the perspective of differential grading patterns. Proposed curriculum changes for undergraduates are focused primarily upon returning programs of study to a broader base with more common core courses taken by students. Such changes are likely to affect cumulative grade-point averages. Generally, as students are required

to take a greater variety of courses, cumulative grade-point averages will tend to decrease. Such reconstruction of the core curriculum will likely spark debate over differential grading practices.

Leading the movement for a broader-based curriculum are those disciplines with more highly-developed and established paradigms. These disciplines generally have more stringent and standardized grading practices. Thus, the paradigmatic development of certain disciplines provides the basis not only for their position within the curriculum reform movement but also justifies the reassertion of their traditionally powerful role in the area of curriculum reform. Those disciplines with lower level paradigm development occupy a position counter to those disciplines with clearly defined paradigms. It is evident that such proposed curriculum restructuring will affect a new generation of students. These students will encounter more courses in more subject areas and therefore will tend to have much lower grades in relationship to those of the student generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Differences in grading practices may serve to indicate departmental alignments in the struggle for power and the conflict among various disciplines.

Table 1

Policy Implications of Differential Faculty
Grading Practices and Standards
by Academic Field

Activity	Differential Grading
Honors Awards	Specifying GPA, a non-equivalent item, as a criterion selects disproportionately more honor students in some programs than in others. Consider the top 10% of students from each program as a more equitable basis.
Graduate (and Undergraduate Transfer) Admissions	Multi-dimensional admissions criteria should be encouraged to recognize differential grading among programs and among institutions.
Enrollment Patterns and/or Program Evaluations	Raw enrollment and degree productivity data do not recognize program quality, employment experience of graduates, nor appropriateness of the program, given the institutional mission.
Departmental Power	With scarce resources, departments may be tempted to enhance enrollments by manipulating course offerings which result in higher grades. Educationally important courses which are unpopular with many students may be sacrificed in power struggles within and among departments.
Recruitment	Institutions establishing or returning to core curricula may find that students react negatively to lower grades associated with a broader range of required courses. Long-range problems may threaten the viability of a core curriculum at such institutions.

Figure 1.

FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire samples opinions on both graduate and undergraduate grading. Fill in the responses only for the level you teach. If you teach both graduate and undergraduate courses, please fill in the appropriate responses for both categories.

Grade Practices and Philosophies

	Undergraduate	Graduate	
1. Please rank the following factors in the order they contibute to a student's final grade that you assign. (Rank each factor from most to least important, numbering respectively from 1 to 6.)			
1. Tests and quizzes	[ ]	[ ]	(1-12)
2. Written assignments	[ ]	[ ]	
3. Class participation	[ ]	[ ]	
4. Attitude and effort	[ ]	[ ]	
5. Final examinations	[ ]	[ ]	
6. Attendance	[ ]	[ ]	
2. What type of class presentation do you primarily use? (Write in the appropriate response number.)	[ ]	[ ]	(13-14)
1. Lecture			
2. Discussion			
3. Laboratory			
4. Other			
3. Which of the following systems do you use most often in assigning students' grades? (Write in the appropriate response number.)	[ ]	[ ]	(15-16)
1. Absolute scale - where each student's performance is judged as a definite percent of perfection of achievement and is independent of the performance of other students. It is possible for every student to receive an excellent rating.			
2. Relative scale - where each student's performance is judged in relation to that of other students. This system is based on the normal distribution curve, and is often referred to as "grading on the curve."			
3. Peer scale - where each student's performance is judged by the student and classmates.			
4. Other - please specify: _____			
4. Which grading system would you propose to be utilized at this university?	[ ]	[ ]	(17-18)
1. Conventional grading system			
2. Pass-fail system			
3. No grading system			
4. Other - please specify: _____			
5. Estimate the percent of your grade that is based upon:			
Objective criteria	[%]	[%]	(19-22)
Subjective criteria	[%]	[%]	(23-26)
	100%	100%	

For questions 6 - 8, write in one of the following response numbers:
1. Much lower 3. About the same 5. Much higher
2. Lower 4. higher 6. Don't know

6. How do grades in your academic field compare with those of other fields at this university?	[ ]	[ ]	(27-28)
7. How do your grades compare with the grades of other faculty members who teach the same academic field at this university?	[ ]	[ ]	(29-30)
8. How do your grades compare with the grades of faculty members in other academic fields at this university?	[ ]	[ ]	(31-32)

FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE - Page Two

For questions 9 - 10, write in one of the following response numbers:
1. None 3. Some 5. Don't know
2. Little 4. Greatly

		Under-graduate	Graduate	
9.	To what extent do you think the meaning of a letter grade varies within your academic field?	[ ]	[ ]	(33-34)
10.	To what extent do you think the meaning of a letter grade varies between other academic fields at this university?	[ ]	[ ]	(35-36)

For questions 11 - 22, write in one of the following response numbers:
1. Strongly agree 3. No opinion 5. Strongly disagree
2. Agree 4. Disagree

11.	Students at this university are a heterogeneous group in academic ability.	[ ]	[ ]	(37-38)
12.	The grades I assign accurately reflect the level of knowledge a student has attained.	[ ]	[ ]	(39-40)
13.	A "B" grade means to me average performance.	[ ]	[ ]	(41-42)
14.	A department must have set standards of performance.	[ ]	[ ]	(43-44)
15.	I conceive of knowledge as a process.	[ ]	[ ]	(45-46)
16.	I conceive of knowledge as a product.	[ ]	[ ]	(47-48)
17.	Each quarter I adjust the content and level of academic material to the nature and level of the students enrolled.	[ ]	[ ]	(49-50)
18.	I do not believe grades adequately reflect a student's ability.	[ ]	[ ]	(51-52)
19.	Students at this university are an average university group on the basis of performance.	[ ]	[ ]	(53-54)
20.	I would like to do away with the present grading structure.	[ ]	[ ]	(55-56)
21.	A primary purpose of grading is to motivate students.	[ ]	[ ]	(57-58)
22.	A primary purpose of grading is to describe performance levels to students.	[ ]	[ ]	(59-60)

Demographic and Academic Information

23. Academic field:
- Business & commerce 1[ ](61)
- Urban studies 2[ ]
- Education 3[ ]
- Fine arts 4[ ]
- Health professions & svcs. 5[ ]
- Letters & languages 6[ ]
- Natural & physical sciences 7[ ]
- Social sciences 8[ ]
- Other 9[ ]

24. Academic rank:
- Professor 1[ ](62)
- Associate professor 2[ ]
- Assistant professor 3[ ]
- Instructor 4[ ]
- Graduate teaching asst. 5[ ]
- Part-time faculty 6[ ]

25. Years teaching in higher education:

	UG	G	
Less than 1 year	1[ ]	[ ]	(63-64)
1 - 2 years	2[ ]	[ ]	
3 - 4 years	3[ ]	[ ]	
5 - 6 years	4[ ]	[ ]	
7 - 9 years	5[ ]	[ ]	
10 - 14 years	6[ ]	[ ]	
15 - 19 years	7[ ]	[ ]	
20 or more years	8[ ]	[ ]	

26. Tenure status:
- Tenured 1[ ](65)
- Not tenured 2[ ]

27. Age:
- 29 & under 1[ ](66)
- 30 - 34 2[ ]
- 35 - 39 3[ ]
- 40 - 49 4[ ]
- 50 - 59 5[ ]
- 60 & over 6[ ]

28. Sex:
- Male 1[ ](67)
- Female 2[ ]

29. Highest degree:
- Doctorate 1[ ](68)
- First professional 2[ ]
- Masters 3[ ]
- Bachelors 4[ ]
- Other 5[ ]

PLEASE MAKE ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON GRADING ON THE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS PAGE. YOUR COOPERATION IN THIS SURVEY IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

Footnotes

[1] This paper is based upon one in a series of grade studies which analyzed grades empirically on the undergraduate and graduate levels by faculty characteristics, by student characteristics, by individual courses, and by academic fields of study. Each study in the series analyzed one aspect of grading to ascertain its contribution to grading trends. Upon request, ERIC Document numbers will be provided.

[2] The questionnaire also served to increase participants' awareness that a single faculty position on grading is never a likely proposition.

[3] The answer options were not exclusive.

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